



## Making the grade

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— A little more than two years ago, a space was transformed at Georgia College in anticipation of new students for the new term, and two weeks later, those students arrived — seventh-grade students to be exact. Students in Georgia College Early College (GCEC) set out as the inaugural class in the program, and this year encountered a milestone as they entered high school. The legacy class members are now freshmen at the nationally recognized program.

GCEC is a program with close ties to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and is one of six programs of its kind launched in Georgia. Each year, 55 seventh-grade students — 40 from Baldwin County and 15 from Putnam County — who are nominated by their school, then selected through a lottery, enter Early College on the campus of Georgia College. The students are presented with challenging course work and accelerated learning programs that will result in the completion of two years of college upon graduation from high school.

“What’s unique about Georgia College Early College is that it is the first in Georgia to begin as a seventh-grade program,” GCEC Principal Camille Daniel-Tyson said. “In fact, Early Colleges across the state are now being modeled after Georgia College Early College.”

Students at the school pay no tuition as the school is funded publicly. Oconee RESA, Putnam and Baldwin County schools and Georgia College are project partners for Early College.

“The school has great support and many partners,” Daniel-Tyson said.

Students in ninth grade now will graduate high school at Early College in 2012. Just two years later, they can graduate college.

“One of the coolest things is that when the kids were originally on campus, we wanted them to dream. Now they own those dreams and aspire to go to college at Harvard, UGA, Georgia Tech or the University of Arkansas. We want them to know that the world doesn’t end at the county line,” Daniel-Tyson said.

Discipline issues are rare at GCEC, and there is no set dress code. Daniel-Tyson said the students self-regulate — perhaps a result of being on campus with college students. High-level academic exposure isn’t the only attribute of the program, though, Daniel-Tyson said.

“The parents really are the strength of the program. They have said they want something better for their children and aren’t afraid to get it,” Daniel-Tyson said. “Our parents get involved. They attend classes with their kids and volunteer. The program hasn’t just changed kids’ lives. It has changed families.”

One side-effect of the meshing of different age students has been the encouragement from the legacy class to lower grades. The net effect of requiring so much from students academically has been a pleasant result. GCEC students who at some point may have been identified by their schools as being “at-risk” and thus eligible for the program, are now outscoring local and state averages on the Georgia Criterion Reference Tests in almost every area.

Students in ninth grade economics, which is ordinarily a senior level academic subject, greeted Daniel-Tyson with a show of less than ten hands when she asked them if, when they were in sixth grade, they knew undoubtedly they would definitely go to college.

“What about now?” Daniel-Tyson asked. Every one of 25 students raised a hand.

One student aspired to become a US Ambassador, one wanted to be an architectural engineer, but also wanted to double major in college so that marine biology could be a fallback option. Another student said she wanted to be a DFCS social worker and would pursue a degree in criminal justice. The students said they would go to Georgia Tech, UGA, Clark University and Stanford Law School. One student said he wanted to play football for the University of Arkansas.

Cody Mills, a ninth-grade student in the economics class, said that the biggest change for him was focus.

“At my other school, I was smart, but I didn’t focus. Here, I can focus on my schoolwork,” Mills said.

“I am the most blessed principal in the world,” Daniel-Tyson said.

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Georgia College Early College (GCEC) teacher Edward Averett answers questions from students in the Legacy class at GCEC. The Union-Recorder